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C O N F I D E N T I A L VATICAN 006539

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/WE (MENNU TI); DRL/IRF (FARR)

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH VATICAN CHINA EXPERT

CLASSIFIED BY: CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR R.J. NICHOLSON FOR REASONS 1.5
(A) AND (D).

1. (C) AMBASSADOR NICHOLSON CALLED ON ARCHBISHOP MARIA CELLI, SECRETARY OF THE ADMINISTRATION FOR THE PATRIMONY OF THE

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APOSTOLIC SEE, ON DECEMBER 14. ALTHOUGH CELLI, IN HIS CURRENT POSITION AS CHIEF ADMINISTRATOR OF VATICAN PROPERTIES DOES NOT HAVE A DIRECT FOREIGN POLICY ROLE, HE IS OFTEN
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CALLED UPON BY THE FOREIGN MINISTRY TO ADVISE AND ASSIST ON CHINA POLICY.

2. (C) CELLI SAID THAT THE VATICAN ACCEPTS THAT THERE WILL BE NO IMPROVEMENT IN CHINA/VATICAN RELATIONS UNTIL AT LEAST THE COMMUNIST PARTY CONGRESS IN MARCH, 2002. THE CURRENT DIRECTOR OF THE RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS BUREAU IN BEIJING IS AN "OLD MAOIST". ACCORDING TO CELLI, THE POWER OF THE RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS BUREAU IS A MAJOR REASON THAT BEIJING REFUSES TO BEGIN DISCUSSIONS ON NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS. CELLI EXPLAINED THAT THE BUREAU IS A MAJOR BUREAUCRACY WHICH IS FIGHTING HARD TO PROTECT ITS POWER, PERKS, AND PERSONNEL. THE HEAD OF THE PATRIOTIC CATHOLIC CHURCH, THE BISHOP OF BEIJING, IS COMPLACENT WITH THE CURRENT SITUATION AND HE TOO DEPENDS ON THE BUREAU FOR HIS POWER AND POSITION.

3. (C) AMBASSADOR ASKED IF THE POPE'S RECENT OVERTURE TO BEIJING HAS HAD ANY EFFECT. CELLI REPLIED THAT THE VATICAN IS NOW ACCEPTING THE FACT THAT IT HAS NOT. HE WENT ON TO SAY THAT CHINA IS A "BIRD CAGE" AND THAT THE VATICAN'S GOAL IS NOT TO BREAK DOWN THE "CAGE" BUT TO WIDEN IT. THE VATICAN DOES NOT EXPECT FULL FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN CHINA ANY TIME IN THE NEAR FUTURE, AND IS THEREFORE WILLING TO ACCEPT A "DECENT" LEVEL. THE AMBASSADOR INQUIRED IF VATICAN RELATIONS WITH TAIWAN IS AN OBSTACLE TO NORMALIZATION. CELLI SAID THAT BEIJING KNOWS "PERFECTLY WELL" THAT TAIWAN IS NOT AN ISSUE. ACCORDING TO CELLI, BEIJING USES THE TAIWAN ISSUE AS AN EXCUSE TO PREVENT DISCUSSION ON THE REAL ISSUE-- THE RIGHT OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH TO NAME ITS OWN BISHOPS.

4. (C) CELLI SAID THAT THE VATICAN KNOWS PRESIDENT BUSH MADE
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AN INTERVENTION ON ITS BEHALF IN SHANGHAI, AND THAT IT IS VERY MUCH APPRECIATED. THIS TYPE OF HELP IS NEEDED AS THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY IN CHINA IS SUFFERING. CELLI POINTED TO THE FACT THAT WITHIN FIVE OR SIX YEARS, THE MAJORITY OF THE ELDERLY BISHOPS WILL PROBABLY DIE. AS THERE WAS A LONG PERIOD IN WHICH THERE WERE NO ORDINATIONS OF PRIESTS AND BISHOPS, THESE DYING BISHOPS WILL BE REPLACED BY VERY YOUNG, INEXPERIENCED CHURCHMEN. THUS, THE VATICAN'S GOAL IS TO NORMALIZE ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH BEIJING BEFORE THIS OCCURS. THIS WOULD ALLOW THE VATICAN TO GUIDE THE TRANSITION.

5. (C) AMBASSADOR ASKED CELLI FOR HIS VIEWS ON VIETNAM. CELLI SAID THAT HE IS NO LONGER INVOLVED ON THE VIETNAM ISSUE. THAT SAID, HE BELIEVED THAT THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY WAS SOMEWHAT IMPROVED THAN WHEN HE WAS LAST THERE FIVE YEARS AGO. AT THAT TIME, HE WAS NOT ALLOWED TO VISIT ANY CATHOLIC CHURCHES IN HANOI.

6. (C) COMMENT: THE VATICAN IS RESIGNED TO THE FACT THAT THE POPE'S OVERTURE IN OCTOBER FELL ON DEAF EARS. IT IS NOW WAITING UNTIL AFTER MARCH TO RESUME ITS DIPLOMATIC PUSH. IT IS LIKELY FOR THE VATICAN TO MAKE SOME CONCESSIONS TO BEIJING TO REESTABLISH ITSELF BEFORE THE END OF THIS DECADE.
NICHOLSON/////////
SEMBLER

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